

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Own Your Hope: The Future Factor”
1 Peter 2:1-13; Jeremiah 13:
May 25, 2014

She was one of my frequent flyers; one of those people who would regularly come to my office looking for assistance. We will call her Linda, though that is not her actual name. She had grown up in a dysfunctional home in which she had been told that she was worthless and would never amount to much of anything. And Linda did her best to prove them true. She never graduated from high school and began having babies in her teens. When I met her she was barely twenty and had two children by two different men...neither of whom were around or could help support the children. Over the course of the years she had two more children, by two still different men, who were not around and could not help support the children. Linda was very nice and always appreciative of the assistance we gave her. But we could both sense that there was an inevitability about her; her upbringing, the choices she had made and the choices she continued to make that said this is where she would always be; always having to find a way to survive. There was no hope.

This is where we find ourselves in our Old Testament story. This story is about a people whose continuing bad choices had so shaped their lives that there would be no escape. The prophet Jeremiah had been trying to help the people of Judah, God's people, make better, more God-like choices. He wanted them to worship God, care for the poor and trust that even in difficult times God would come through. But time after time they refused to listen and made a series of ever poorer choices. Finally, it was too late. Their kingdom would be destroyed. In the face of their pleading for help Jeremiah uttered these famous words. “Can an Ethiopian change his skin? Can a leopard change its spots?” In other words, you all have become who you are and you cannot change. There is no hope.

For many of us, this idea that we become who we are and that there is no possibility of being something else, of improving, of breaking past patterns is disturbing. We want to believe that there is an opportunity for change; that there is hope. If this is what you are hoping for...so to speak...then Peter has something for you this morning. This small section of Peter's letter is all about how change is possible. And it is possible because of what God does, what we do and then what we do with God.

First it is what God does. Peter opens this part of his letter by reminding the people of what they once were...or perhaps still were. They were those who had been consumed by malice, guile, insincerity, envy and slander. In a sense they were ordinary people whose lives mirrored the society around them. They had been raised in a particular way, in a particular society and there was little they could do about it. What Peter tells them though is that while they might not be able to do anything about it, God could...and God did. God began by taking them out of their spiritual location and placing them a new one. They were now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.” What the Apostle implies is that by being part of a new Christ empowered society they were given new options. They could make new and different choices. Many of us understand this. Sometimes when we have changed relationships, jobs, or companies there opened before us opportunities to make new and better choices. For me this happened when I went to college. Prior to that moment I had always been David Judson's little brother. And David was brilliant. He was always the best student in the schools he and I attended and he even graduated number one in a class of 1,200. My homeroom teacher, who had had my older brother, called me David for three years. Going to college allowed me the freedom to be me, and not a mini-David. This is what God does for us. God offers us a new beginning in a new place.

What comes second is what we need to do. Peter tells his readers that, while being part of this new community in a new location is great, it is still up to individuals to take advantage of the possibilities that the new location offers. Peter writes, “Like newborn infants, you must long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that you may grow into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” The implication here is that even though these people had been chosen by God to be part of this new community, it would do them no good unless they chose to learn and to participate in the process of spiritual renewal and formation. I believe this is one of those places where Christians have always struggled...we like being part of the community but we are not sure we want to spend the time to develop new and Christ-like habits. For me, this meant making the best of my new opportunity at college, which at first I did not do. After my first year, I dropped out. Fortunately a very wise man with whom I worked drew me aside one day and reminded me that, unlike many of the men where we worked, I could still take advantage of my choices and return to school; which I did. This is what Peter is reminding us of. We have been placed in this new community but we still need to take advantage of the choices before us

The final piece of Peter’s hope filled change process is what we do with God. He writes, “Come to him, a living stone...and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, a royal priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” For Peter, the reality of change was that even as part of God’s new community, even as those who choose to learn and grow, we cannot in and of ourselves become wholly different. We have to allow God room to work in our lives. As people of the Enlightenment we have come to believe that we ought to have the will power to change. We ought to be able, given the correct information, to make the kinds of choices that enhance our lives. However, study after study has shown that without help, people usually do not take advantage of opportunities for changes in finances, relationships or most other areas of life. Change, significant change, is difficult. This is why, I believe, Peter tells us that we have a partner in our change process. God is present desiring to build us into new people. Even having gone back to and graduated from college, my life was not where I knew it ought to be. Finally I asked God for help...to take control...and in so doing allowed God to set me on a new course; one that has brought me here. Peter tells us that if we allow God room to work, God will indeed help us with a new beginning, just as God helped Peter...and me.

The trajectory of Linda’s life had been and continued to be on a downward cycle. Trapped into living with her family that truly despised her, there seemed little hope. Then one day she showed up in my office and said she had moved out from her family and had decided to become a medical assistant. A friend had told her about how she could change her life. She was coming to me, to my church for help. Though she was taking out loans for tuition and some to live on she needed help getting started. She needed a bridge gift. Would we help her? I told her we would...though I have to admit I was dubious. Her past track record was not great. However we saw less and less of her. She would only drop by when she was in desperate need. Then one day she showed up in my office and handed me a picture. It was her graduation picture. I asked why she was giving it to me and she said because no one else cared. No one in her family would even come to her graduation. She had made it. She had a new trajectory.

In a sense, Linda has become for me a living metaphor of change. God changes our location. We choose to take advantage of that change. We allow God, both directly and through others to help us change. Then change happens. A new trajectory becomes possible. My challenge for each of us then this week is to ask ourselves this, “How am I working with God in order to continue to change into the person God intends me to be.”